

BENEATH THE

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WAVES

How biologist Nadine Bauer is showcasing an underwater world

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Left: A world lurks under the waters of Malta, prime for diving. Above: An aerial shot of Nadur on Gozo

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very year, visitors in huge numbers come to Malta and Gozo for the warm welcome, ancient walled cities, heady festivals, unique food and undulating terrain. Topping the list for many are the country's historic sites, which range from 3600BC megalithic temples to World War II bunkers carved out beneath a 16th-century citadel.

However, despite the archipelago's well-established reputation as one of the best scuba diving locations in Europe, comparatively few of these travellers come to explore its balmy waters (only an estimated 4.4%, according to Visit Malta). While visitors flock to the Upper Barrakka Gardens to gaze across the Grand Harbour and queue to peek inside the revered St John's Co-Cathedral, some of Malta's most remarkable history sits in silence, almost unnoticed, at the bottom of the sea.

One woman wooed by these underwater wonders is Nadine Bauer, a 26-year-old German biologist, photographer and scuba diving instructor who left behind the cenotes of Mexico and marine life of Madeira to discover the secrets of Malta's revered waters. Today, she teaches scuba diving in St Paul's Bay in the north of the island.

'Malta has such a unique history compared to other countries in Europe; it's been conquered by so many colonies,' Nadine says. 'So many' barely scratches the surface of the islands' complicated history of occupation. The collective landmass is small (316km²), but the islands' position between the Straits of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal means they have received an unending stream of visitors over the years.

From the Phoenician settlers in 800BC through the Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs,

Normans, the Knights of St John, the French and the British. Malta hardly had a minute to itself until independence in 1964. Marks of each civilisation can be seen etched into the islands today, from its Arabic-tinged language to its North African gastronomic influences and stately Baroque architecture. And it makes complete sense that the seafloor surrounding this ever-changing archipelago was not left unscathed by all of the activity that took place above it.

An added appeal of the many shipwrecks is the frankly remarkable transparency of Maltese waters. Visibility here is extensive and, according to Nadine, views can extend underwater as far as 50m during the summer, making the destination quite extraordinary.

I've seen this for myself many times. I learnt to dive in Gozo in 2020, and am yet to log visibility of less than 20m (considered crystal by many standards). Gazing out into the cerulean blue at depth can be disarmingly hypnotic, but clear waters make every scuba adventure that bit more magical. Watching sunlight strobe across the stacked boulders of the fallen Azure Window rock arch in Dwejra is captivating; the inching fireworms, wavering seagrass strands and darting damselfish all moving in their own idiosyncratic dance.

Good visibility is also a boon in Malta and Gozo's underwater caves. At the base of many of the islands' majestic cliffs lie a profusion of caverns, and while light may not penetrate very far inside, it's the exits that really pack a punch. I'll never forget the first time I looked out into the open ocean from inside Wied il-Miela's huge cavern.

Above the surface, the view of the valley's great archway shimmered, while below, 14m of perfectly clear water led down to a soft, sandy bottom and smooth ashen rocks. Nor will I ever forget my first foray into Cathedral Cave, a cavern that divers can surface within to see a laser beam of sunlight spear through a spherical hole in the wall, illuminating a glistening, domed interior.

For Nadine however, there are several sites that she returns to, their stories and photogenic appeal proving irresistible. Top of her list



Clockwise from left: Nadine diving down to the ocean floor; on the seafront in Valletta

is the *Um el Faroud*, a 115m-long Libyan tanker. 'The Faroud is so special,' Nadine explains. 'It's a very big vessel wreck with a lot of history [it was scuttled to make an artificial reef after an explosion damaged it beyond repair] and is essentially two separate dive sites. When you descend to it, a humongous wreck suddenly appears in front of you,' she says. 'Then, if you go inside into the engine room, the light floods in and it's amazing. I really love it.'

Nadine is particularly interested in how light interacts with water, which means it's no surprise that two of her other favourite locations, both in Gozo, are known across the islands for their enchanting light play. The first is the wreck of the *MV Karwela*, a former cruise ship and ferry scuttled for divers in 2006. Thanks to a plethora of purposefully made openings, beautiful streaks of sunlight cut across the empty deck and down its stairway.

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Inside, damselfish carve out dark spots in the beams, while outside slithering moray eels skirt the hull's base. Nadine describes it as a unique place to photograph and one of her most beloved wrecks.

Her other favoured spot is the Inland Sea. A huge crevice in the cliff wall at Dwejra links a small pool of water to the open ocean, and divers can swim through the tunnel 25m below the surface. A huge vertical bar of cobalt blue separates near-black rock walls that tower either side. It's a truly hypnotic experience for any diver, though land lovers can also enjoy it for a small fee thanks to locals who carry people through on fishing boats.

Below: A view of spellbinding Valetta from the shoreline

close, it disappears and often you don't get a good shot.'

With variations in visibility, weather and the flora and fauna, no two descents are the same. It was the temptation to explore more fully these areas that convinced Nadine to graduate from a recreational diver (limited to depths of up to 40m) to a technical diver, allowing her to go deeper. And it seems that more visitors are following in Nadine's footsteps: between 2021 and 2023, PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) reported a 90% increase in technical diving certifications in Malta and Gozo. It's a surprising figure, one believed to be down to a renewed awareness

of the country's many deeply submerged marvels.

However, thanks to the islands' diverse underwater landscape, extensive certification isn't necessary to see many of its treasures. The Blue Hole in Gozo is arguably Malta's most popular dive site and is accessible to those with entry-level certifications – as are Cathedral Cave and Wied il-Miela. Some wrecks, such as the *HMS Maori*, are also shallow and can be viewed when snorkelling.

For Nadine, though, deeper is better. 'It's an environment where we're not supposed to be, but I think it's this sense of the unknown that makes it more attractive to me.'

'When you're inside a wreck and the light floods in... It's amazing. I love it'

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Maltese waters aren't generally lauded for their marine life, but it turns out you just need to know where to look. Earlier this year Nadine visited Filfla, one of Malta's many islets. Once used for target practice by the British Navy, the battered rock above ground is now home to petrels, endemic lizards and door snails while underwater it's filled with generously-sized damselfish and rays.

Nadine went exploring with Sharklab-Malta, a non-profit organisation trying to protect and raise awareness of sharks and rays around the islands. 'Our role was to count how many rays we saw in a specific area and identify the species,' Nadine says. 'Mostly, we saw stingrays, the smaller ones. Another team claimed to have seen a devil ray, though, they were diving on another part of the island.' Unsurprisingly, photographing these skittish creatures was a touch trickier than other deep-sea subjects. 'They're quite fast, so as soon as you get close they move a lot, which is very challenging – particularly compared to wrecks. Marine life is life, so if you get too



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OCTOPUS GARDEN

To train with Nadine (and if you're a German speaker) then it has to be **Octopus Garden** Malta's leading German SSI (Scuba Schools International) dive school. octopus-garden.net